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ABSTRACT

The fundamental features of a bilingual after-school program designed to raise the level of and improve the attitudes toward school achievement on the part of a group of elementary school youngsters is presented in this document. The description traces the evolution of design and practice in the programs' structure methodology, in its training and supervision of both professional and para professional staff, and in its criteria for the evaluation of the children's progress. It also explores the lessons learned from the trial and error, review, and redirection that took place during the Learning Center's first two years of growth. In addition to its soundness of structure, its high quality of leadership and its practices and supervision, the center also contributes in the following areas: it demonstrates the degree to which structure and leadership are essential to the success of a community-based education program, it explores and modifies the Open Classroom form for severely deprived children, it provides experiences relating to the development of revised evaluation criteria for childrens progress in learning, and it embodies a high level of service, unique for a social agency, in an all embracing educational therapy flowing from ongoing diagnostic prescriptive assessments. (Author/AM)

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A New Concept for Compensatory Learning

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An experimental approach to serving the educational needs of socially disadvantaged children and their teachers within the inner-city setting.

INTRODUCTION

10/8/74. "Ramon is extremely negative about himself and others. He is unwilling to take part in most things, and especially refuses to look at books."

6/16/75. "Ramon tries new things, works with others, and is mastering some reading skills. His attendance has been perfect. More important than his new ability to sound out consonants is the fact that he now wants to read."

(Two entries, eight months apart, from a teacher's monthly summaries at the Learning Center of The Children's Aid Society's Sloane Center.)

A description of an eight year-old's behavior in relation to learning - the degree of progress noted is hardly impressive. Yet, to those who accepted the task of teaching a child whom the school could only despair over, the change was significant. Ramon was among the most difficult pupils at the Learning Center, but the governing expectation that he would learn was implicit in his acceptance into the program. Though he clearly had many of the problems described in the school referral, the Learning Center psychologist also found him, under certain conditions, to be alert, intelligent, and receptive to learning. The question was "How would he be taught?" While Ramon's resistance presented a vigorous challenge, that challenge would be met, along with the others, in the context of creativity and commitment which characterizes this unique community-based educational program.

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What follows is a presentation of the fundamental features of a bilingual after-school program designed to raise the level of, and improve the attitudes toward, school achievement on the part of a group of elementary school youngsters. The description will attempt to trace the evolution of design and practice in the program's structure and methodology, in its training and supervision of both professional and para-professional staff, and in its criteria for the evaluation of the children's progress. Most important, it will explore the lessons learned from the trial and error, review and redirection that took place during the Learning Center's first two years of growth.

THE SETTING AND THE PROBLEM

The setting is New York City's Lower East Side, a community of increasing decay and poverty despite the services of a few agencies which offer their pittance of support to the multi-problem residents. The majority of families - 70% - are Hispanic (mainly Puerto Rican), 20% are Black, and the remaining group, approximately 10%, are of varied European origin,--East European Jews, Ukrainians, Italians. The latter group, mainly elderly people, stem from earlier migrations preceding the more recent Puerto Rican population groups by at least 50 years.

In the center of Sixth Street, between Avenues B and C, the Sloane Center stands like an axis of symmetry, absorbing in equal measure from each extremity the whole panorama of despair. Through decades of migrations and emigrations, through social ills described as anomie, alienation, and juvenile delinquency, through violent power struggles described as ethnic or political clashes leading to polarizations, through educational degeneration resulting in kids with no-place-to-go-and-nothing-to-do who are then described as lacking mobility, the Sloane Center has prevailed, nourished by the sight of flowers in window boxes and on fire escapes, by youths walking tall past Junkie Park, by the exchange of love with parents and children in the neighborhood.

In 1973, the Sloane Center began to remedy a growing casualty of the neighborhood. Children were growing up on Sixth Street and its environs with the stigma of "school failure". Increasing numbers of poor children of normal development gave up on their childhood business of learning. While this situation greatly reflected the national crisis in urban education, there were added problems for the children of the Lower East Side. One was the disorganization and chaos in the District 1 schools caused by a relentless struggle for control between the United Federation of Teachers and the Community School Board. Learning in this environment would be a challenge for any child. For the Spanish-speaking child, frequently from an impoverished background, confronted with the task of learning to understand, speak, and read English, it was totally confusing and often, paralyzing. The number of children who "failed" by 1973 had reached overwhelming proportions. By the time they were in fifth grade, 80% of the district's children were reading two years or more below their grade level.

THE PLAN FOR A LEARNING CENTER

The Sloane Center's innovative plan of intervention to "rescue" 50 children each year from illiteracy and waste was developed with the endorsement of the District I School Board and received its funds through the Emergency School Aid Act, administered through the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.* Such an after-school service offering a complete diagnostic-prescriptive approach to learning problems was unique for a social agency and could evolve as a model program for other communities. Who would receive the services and how would they be offered?

The Children

The children to be served by the Learning Center were from 7 to 10 years of age. Most were referred from the local public schools by teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators. The only eligibility requirements were that the children be reading two or more years below grade level, be of at least average intelligence, and, in the public school teacher's judgment, be capable of functioning reasonably well with peers and adults. Children who were retarded or who had severe emotional handicaps could not be accepted since the staff was not organized to handle such problems. Children identified by the Learning Center psychologist as needing psychotherapy were referred to Sloane Center's Mental Health Unit where they worked with a professional therapist on an individual basis once a week while attending the Learning Center. All of the Learning Center's children received an annual physical examination from a Children's Aid Society physician.

The Staff

By the end of the second year of the Learning Center's operation, the composition of staff had evolved to meet the various developmental needs of the children. The "team" was led by the Learning Center Director, a bilingual Master in Social Work who coordinated all aspects of the program and administration, including community liaison. A social worker assisted her in providing specific services to families of the children in attendance. A part-time psychologist saw each child twice yearly for the purposes of diagnosing his/her problems in relation to learning, of evaluating progress, and of proposing appropriate curriculum directions to the Head Teacher. The Head Teacher, a professionally trained bilingual person with particular skills in the teaching of reading and in curriculum development, could use the diagnostic information to maximize the child's participation in all activities of the Learning Center. Her essential contribution, however,

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* Curtailment of federal funds in the 1975/76 year has resulted in a program reduced to 30 children and four teachers. Funding to sustain the third year of the Learning Center Program has been generously provided by The Louis Calder Foundation, W. Alton Jones Foundation, Inc., The Prospect Hill Foundation, Inc., Surdna Foundation and other friends of The Children's Aid Society.

was to design a sequential prescription for mastering reading skills matched to the child's abilities and learning style. It was then her job to translate this design to each of the seven teachers who worked directly with small groups of children.

The teachers were para-professionals, young men and women, most of them bilingual, many originating from the Hispanic community. All were experienced in working with children and a few were involved in teacher-training programs. It was their job to guide and support the children's efforts in the activities of the Learning Center Open Classroom and in the homogeneously grouped reading program.

Relationship to the District Schools

Contact with the schools regarding each child was maintained by the staff leadership on an ongoing basis. Sharing of information gained through the efforts of staff at the Learning Center frequently helped to redirect a teacher in the public school in her attitude and approach toward a child. The illumination of his behavior through the Learning Center's insights often restored her belief in his educability and in her own power to affect it.

Relationship to Parents

In working with parents too, the staff was able to offer some enlightenment concerning the future social and educational growth of their children. Parents burdened with the oppressions of poverty were frequently hopeless and helpless in meeting their children's many needs. Through the techniques of social work intervention, the staff offered support to the parents in their effort to function as a source of nurturance for their children.

THE CENTER AND ITS PROGRAM

The entire top floor of the Sloane Center was transformed into an oasis of light and space. In the center, a raised area, floating like a ship's deck, divided the room into two parts. Somewhat isolated from the rest, this higher level was the site of the Center library.

Monday through Thursday, toward the end of the Public School day, and usually accompanied by a teacher from the Learning Center, the children would come and ascend the stairway to the giant classroom. Then for two-and-a-half hours, they experienced learning in another way than at school, in a program richly embroidered with the culture of the community and with an adult they came to know and trust. There were musical activities with instruments to accompany familiar songs and to expose the youngsters to the music and lyrics of many cultures. In the drama program, the children could work for a month or more on plays or other projects involving acting and movement techniques which encouraged greater boldness and clarity of expression. Here too was a place for revelation about the violence and turmoil of life in a threatening environment. There was a daily fare of crafts activities

from tie-dying to kite-making. There were relay games with phonic and number themes, board games to master, and tape recorders to use for a dialogue, an interview, or even a monologue. There were snacks to be planned and prepared in a variety of ways, special dishes to be shopped for, measured, cooked, and offered at times of festivity. Learning could be a delight to the mind and the senses. In an infinite number of ways that message was broadcast.

The flashing of lights at 3:15 signalled the beginning of the Reading Time at the Learning Center. In a basically phonetic, highly structured program which presented manageable tasks matched to the child's ability, he or she could function in spite of the fear of exposing past failures and risking new ones. Reinforcement of the skills learned was an essential part of the Reading Time, but was also woven into the activity periods which embraced it. Once the children had discovered the rewards of hard work guided by a skilled and caring person, the Reading Time became sacred. Their objectives for the day fulfilled, they could then resume their other activities or plan further adventures in learning.

Planning and Supervision

On Fridays, the entire "team" would meet. Director, Head Teacher, the seven group teachers, and occasionally the psychologist and social worker, would review the events of the week and plan ahead. Responses of specific children, recorded in daily logs kept by each teacher, were shared with the group as a means of evaluating individual progress and the worth of the activities themselves. Planning involved skill training for the teachers, conducted by the Head Teacher, the Director or any other person with expertise relevant to the objectives put forth. The subject matter for these sessions could move in a myriad of unpredictable pathways.

For, in two years of growing, the Learning Center became a microcosm of urban education in the United States. Hardly a crisis of the classroom and community failed to echo within its walls. There were issues of curriculum organization and methodology, of training and leadership, of conflicts involving race, social class, age and sex, of questions of discipline, school-community relations, bilingualism and more.

In this historic time of bicentennial splendor, when educational facilities for the most needy are being crippled by drastic cutbacks, what was learned about the ways in which a supplementary educational program can serve a deprived community?

LESSONS OF THE LEARNING CENTER EXPERIENCE

A decisive factor in the positive evolution of the Learning Center was the strength of commitment which The Children's Aid Society made to its successful development. Because of this commitment which involved the Sloane Center Director and the entire Learning Center staff, there was a constancy in the appraisal and modification of the program from its earliest beginnings. This led to fundamental changes by the second year of operation which were essentially part of an effort to simplify, clarify, and structure.

Bilingualism

One area that was affected was that of bilingualism in the Language Arts curriculum, in particular, the simultaneous presentation of Spanish and English in the teaching of Reading. In the belief that the Learning Center's major contribution to the Spanish-speaking child was to support his struggle at school to master the English language, the bilingual stress with which the program was begun was modified to a bi-cultural one. Although there are still some unresolved questions concerning the timely use of Spanish or English in the teaching of Reading, the Learning Center is committed to the creation of a program which fosters ethnic identification, particularly for the Hispanic child. This is accomplished through the use of the Hispanic idiom in all its variety (and including the Spanish language) in stories, songs, cooking experiences, and celebrations, as well as special focus on the places of origin of the community's Spanish-speaking population. The history and culture of other minority children represented at the Learning Center, particularly Black Americans, also plays an important role in the curriculum.

Testing the Open Classroom Structure

The philosophy and structure of the Open Classroom were of primary influence in the program at its inception. It was found during the first year, however, that undefined physical space contained constant distractions and only reinforced the children's difficulties in focusing on tasks. In order to derive the maximum benefits from the setting, it was decided to create divisions in the space to form smaller defined areas where small groups could assemble. This was done by using the basic furniture available - bookcases, tables, and screens.

It was also found that constantly shifting groupings and teachers were not only overstimulating, but also didn't allow for the predictability the children needed in the new environment. With each child working for the greater part of the session with the same teacher, a needed relationship could develop and deepen. With a stable group of children, there was opportunity for the growth of planning and decision-making skills and the sharing of responses to life at home, at school, and at the Learning Center. It was only as a complement to this stable structure that the elements of choice offered by the Open Classroom could be utilized.

Leadership and Supervision

The strength in the leadership and supervision of the Learning Center Program, reaching a fruitful climax in the spring of 1975, was the most decisive development of the second year. In addition to a Learning Center Director of outstanding administrative ability and great sensitivity to the community and the educational and emotional needs of its children, an experienced Head Teacher fashioned a reading program for each child and served as a constant resource for the curriculum of the Open Classroom. In the Friday training-workshop-evaluation time, the teachers would share their ideas out of which a purposeful activity plan and objectives would emerge, designed to reinforce and enhance the mastery achieved during the previous week.

It is important to realize that the richness and appropriateness of the Open Classroom environment and the children's involvement in it were not spontaneous events. Rather, they germinated and were developed with the staff collective. Carrying out the plans involved on-the-job supervision by the Head Teacher and the Learning Center Director.

The heart of the Learning Center's success lies in this "process", i.e., the transmission of expertise and the supervision of its implementation. Consequently, understanding of this process and its underlying assumptions may yield the most constructive lessons for all community-based education programs. For, implicit in such programs is the belief that community personnel who lack professional credentials have, nonetheless, a vital contribution to make because of their familiarity with the culture of the children (including life style, values, and language) and because of their firm commitment to the children's achievement as learners.

The Learning Center saw the community non-professional, frequently an aspiring teacher, as a person whose motivation flowed from a strong desire to build a child's skills and understanding, the better to equip him/her to cope with a frequently oppressive and destructive environment. Just as the only fruitful prophecy for the children is that they will learn, the principles which underlie community-based human services lead to the expectation that the community's commitment, in this case to the education of its children, is a deeply felt one. To make this assumption and then fail to supply the tools for its achievement is to cause painful frustration and demoralization for the teacher. The program of supervision and training, the demand for weekly and monthly accountability, and the ongoing atmosphere of assessment to improve performance at the Learning Center were efforts to supply these tools.

Based on respect for the motivations and commitment of the staff, the Learning Center's leadership offered educational expertise including knowledge of materials and details of methodology, how to guage success, when to seek and where to find answers to the teaching challenges that were omnipresent.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The essence of this view - that a serious educational program can only succeed with purposeful direction, standards and accountability for all concerned with its operation - may seem obvious to many concerned with quality education for all children. Yet, it requires statement in order to refute another "belief" encountered in community-based programs and to some extent operative in the early months of the Learning Center. That is, that the absence of direction of inexperienced teachers is a sign of respect and confidence and grants them "autonomy". The futility of this position was starkly revealed in the teachers' reactions to the program during the first year, and again, in the spring of 1975. The exhiliration of the teaching staff at the end of the second year's program was in sharp contrast to the demoralization, self-effacement, and anger expressed by teachers after the first six months of a barely structured, almost leaderless Learning Center.

While it is true that the second year teachers were, on the whole, a somewhat more experienced group, all referred to the invaluable guidance they had received from the Director and the Head Teacher and the degree of fulfillment they had experienced in carrying out their assigned jobs. The joyous experience of teaching a child who succeeded in learning was described by a number of teachers and clearly reinforced their interest in becoming credentialed teachers and/or returning to the Learning Center in the coming year. Though there were occasional critical comments regarding the style in which leadership was sometimes given, any feelings of resentment were clearly secondary to the overwhelming appreciation of a consistent and well-informed guidance. The reliance on professional leadership appeared to be most potent in connection with the 45 minute reading period when the children worked with the same teacher each day on prescribed material. The establishment of this "tradition" stands out as a major achievement of the Learning Center. Struggling against a variety of non-learning behaviors ranging from fearful immobility to restlessness, the staff persisted and succeeded in its efforts to enforce a time for disciplined and purposeful learning.

Within the setting established and with the leadership provided, teachers at the Learning Center developed a striking amount of expertise. There was early realization that success in learning requires many, many experiences. The search for the proper "match" - whether it be the one to stimulate, to teach, or to reinforce, was continuous and increasingly creative.

THE STAFF'S PERCEPTION OF THE LEARNING CENTER

Despite a high level of morale at the program's closing, many staff members, in different ways, voiced regrets about the things they had failed to do. This took the form of a general demand for more preparation time. It is one thing to propose a bi-cultural atmosphere and quite another to be prepared with an authentic Puerto Rican recipe and a methodology for making its preparation a learning experience. As in its attitude towards evaluation criteria, the staff's view was reflective of growth in the understanding of the learning process, including the tools which should be on hand in an opportune moment. The proposal for the 1975-76 semester does, in fact, call for a core of teachers to spend two hours more each day at the Learning Center preparing and planning curriculum.

In spite of the shortcomings that were felt by many, the overall response of staff members to the 1974-75 year at the Learning Center was in the form of knowledge gained on the job. Their responses touched on themselves as teachers, the children as learners, their feelings about the Center. Below, a polyphony of some hopes and insights:

> "The kids work better after they've eaten."
> "I always let them draw a while before we read."
> "Drama was great ... it got the kids to work together."

"They hardly ever brought in reports of home ... they wanted to perform fantasy, giants and stuff."
"The kids get confused about what days to come ... must teach them the calendar."
"We could cut out all fights ... they learned to talk it out."
"When we made lemonade, they learned to measure. They found out you don't just throw things together ... they won't remember next week."
"The hardest part was coping with the child who ignored you ... we need more training in how to deal with negativity."
"The hardest part was to do an on-the-job scene." (without preparation)
"Some materials were a pain. Why do they call a hat, a cap?"
"Hot weather makes the kids jumpy."
"The worst punishment was not letting them come to the program."
"Even if they didn't improve in reading, the place gives them self-confidence ... they could say what they didn't know."
"Everybody here cares ... we worked like hell."
"What we need is time."

Many comments apply to children at learning regardless of social class or ethnic background. Some have particular relevance to a life of poverty on New York's Lower East Side or similar neighborhoods. Together they suggest the expertise being developed by a group of young men and women (some with past roots in the community, others still connected in many ways) for educating poor minority children who have already experienced failure at learning. In the creation of such a corps of teachers, the Sloane Center and The Children's Aid Society have performed a unique service, pursued with deliberate effort in the midst of a community in chaos.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION

The staff's growing awareness of the kind and degree of change in the children's attitudes and achievements necessarily led to questions regarding the criteria for evaluation. How does one measure progress in a child like Ramon who has finally stopped "defending" himself from the expected failure of non-learning and is beginning to "cope" with the tasks of learning? In her qualitative observations, the Learning Center psychologist was able to note an overall improvement in the children's self-confidence, expressed in their improved ability to communicate and to persist at a task. This was apparent to all of the staff in various contexts of the program, yet impossible to quantify. It was observed by the Head Teacher in connection with the numerous projects of the Open Classroom. It was in carrying these out that the children made advances in their ability to plan, to cooperate, to ask for help, to persevere.

The testing program itself was limited in offering statistical evidence of progress. This was because of the staggered schedule of intake of children and the spread of the testing period itself. The psychologist's time limitations and the children's availability were also considerations in the testing schedule. As a result, two

children might receive the diagnostic battery three months apart. Therefore, the test results, partly for reasons of principle, but also, necessarily, served a diagnostic function rather than a measurement one.

There was widespread feeling among the staff that the tests failed to record the children's achievement since they were unrelated in content and method to what was taught at the Learning Center. One projection for the future was that the Learning Center should develop its own assessment tools for the particular skills that the children were attempting to master.

It would seem, apart from the validity of the test scores and of the tests themselves, that the sole criteria for the children's goal achievement in the Learning Center cannot be the results of formal testing. It should be possible to evaluate a child's progress through a particular instructional sequence as it appears in the materials and methods of the Open Classroom and/or in the smaller group. He would then be rated, or referenced against himself, with the criteria for achievement being his movement toward the objective chosen, i.e., along the course of the instructional sequence.

Other types of assessment might include systematic observation of learning-related behaviors, e.g., attention to task where, again, the child is his own reference point and his achievement is measured against the point from which he has come. Here, of course, it would be necessary to assume the accuracy and reliability of the observation, but such a skill is trainable.

If teacher morale were measurable, this, too, would provide an important source of information, although not really "hard" evidence. Assuming the premise, as the Learning Center did, that a teacher's self-assessment is influenced by his/her success or failure as a teacher, the degree of satisfaction observed, or level of morale, would imply a great deal about the children's progress. Although one might anticipate some face-saving illusions of success, it is interesting to note that teachers at the Learning Center were quite explicit, albeit discouraged, in stating that a child made little or no progress.

THOUGHTS FOR THE FUTURE

A sense of confidence in the soundness and stability of the Learning Center's progress in two years leads one to think ahead to the unfolding of an ever-richer curriculum. Its aim would be (along with the systematic building of reading skills in a setting which offers sensory and intellectual stimulation and reinforcement), to develop the "habits of mind", the orientation toward learning, which most of the children have not had the opportunity to develop. For the child who, in his early years of "action on objects" rarely felt the benefits of the exchange and reinforcement of his discoveries, there is a compensatory need for this "layer" of growth as great or greater than his need for remedial reading. It is not uncommon for "decoding" but poorly thinking children to read without attention to meaning, making substitutions

for undecipherable words which have no relationship to the total context. The mastery of phonics is, after all, only a tool for interpreting the language which brings enlightenment to a curious mind. Without the orientation toward meaning for the purpose of knowing, the enlightenment never comes.

The Learning Center's approach to helping the children "learn to learn", while already operative to a considerable extent, might be strengthened by a more conscious approach to this need. This would involve a two-fold effort throughout the curriculum, expressed in the experiences of the Open Classroom, in the choice of invented and commercial games, in problem solving planning sessions, and in one-to-one dialogues.

The first part is an all embracing encouragement of creative and critical thinking, and seeks to:

1) Help the children organize and integrate much that they already know on some level, but since it was acquired chaotically and poorly reinforced, has barely been articulated.

2) Broaden the children's self-awareness by developing self-consciousness concerning learning and the evolution, strategy and tools of their own thinking.

3) Develop a sensitivity to "process", to the sequence and causes and consequences of events - natural, physical and behavioral as well.

4) Build specific cognitive skills that aid abstract thinking, such as: the ability to distinguish relevant from irrelevant data, the use of categorical thinking in all its complexity, the ability to infer and to use strategic thinking.

The second part involves the building of a fund of concepts pertaining to relationships of all kinds, to time, to space, to quantity. These might be focal to the ongoing activities of the Open Classroom, e.g., the measurement and sequence involved in cooking, woodworking, planting experiences. They might also constitute the specific objectives of a mathematics or science or bi-cultural enrichment lesson.

The questioning and pursuit of solutions which this focus on "thinking" implies would, if successful, permeate the total environment of the Learning Center. It would be reflected in the provocative and stimulating visual displays, with material to interpret as well as to view. It would be heard in the more communicative language of the children. It would be seen in the more purposeful application to tasks of all kinds. As a further innovative contribution of the Sloane Learning Center, it would accomplish a foremost Brunerian objective of education; i.e., to "give to children a respect for the powers of their own thinking, for their power to generate good questions, to come up with interesting informed guesses."

SUMMARY

In the context of the widespread destruction of quality educational services, it seems necessary to add the obvious. That is, that the Learning Center maintain, with whatever resources are available, its soundness of structure and its high quality of leadership to staff through its practices in training and supervision. The uniqueness of its contribution in the following areas suggests a value beyond the immediate community service it performs:

1) Its demonstration of the degree to which structure and leadership are essential to the success of a community-based education program.

2) Its exploration and modification of the Open Classroom form for severely deprived children.

3) Its provocative experience relating to the development of revised evaluation criteria for children's progress in learning.

4) Its high level of service, unique for a social service agency, in an all-embracing educational therapy flowing from ongoing diagnostic-prescriptive assessments.

As a demonstration project to other communities, as a source for research, as a field for teacher and para-professional training, the Sloane Learning Center has two years of heuristic experience to share. In a mutually beneficial exchange with other institutions and communities, the Center should, with continued and adequate financial support, enhance its accomplishments as an outstanding educational program.